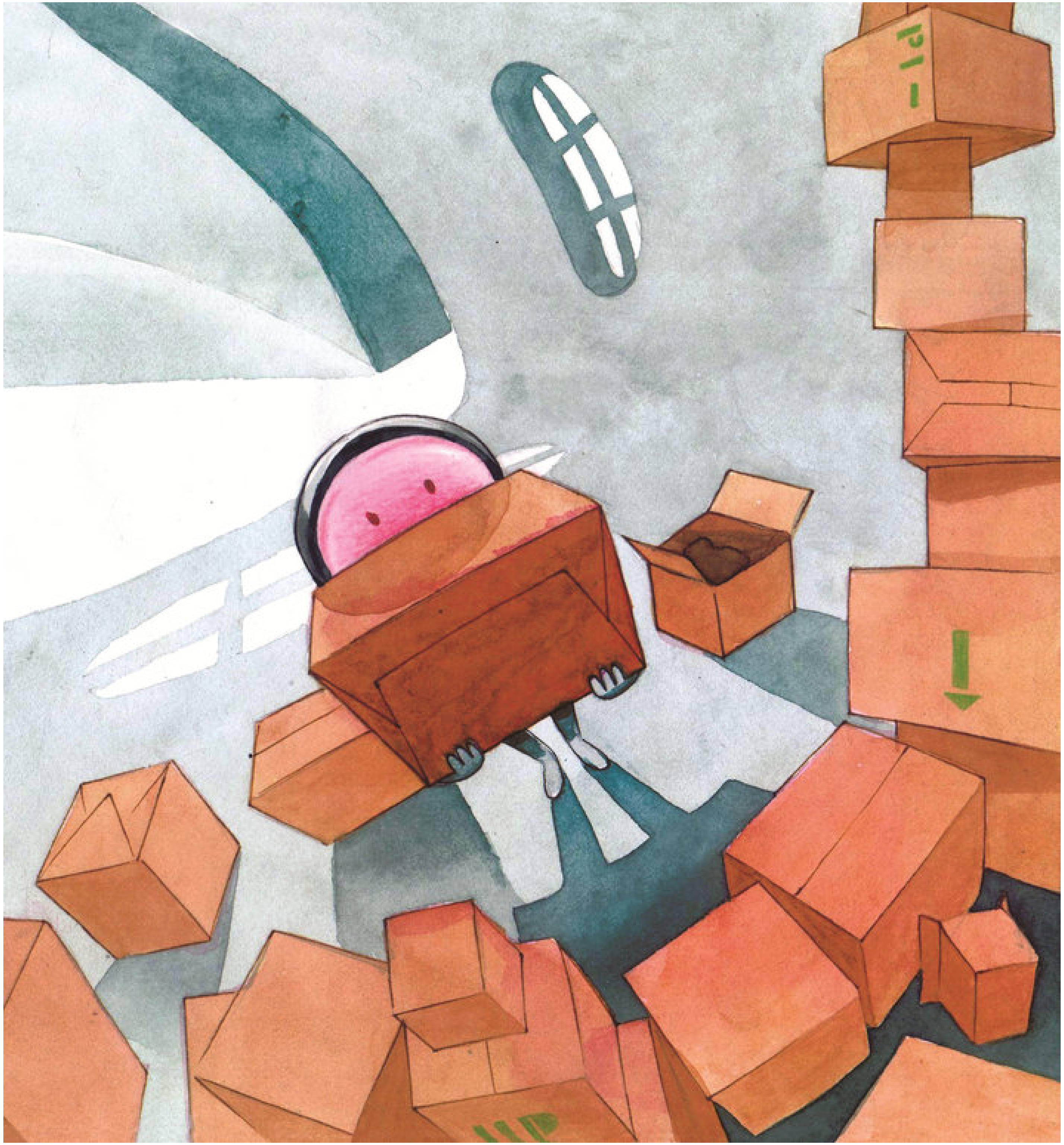


Bonda and Devi

Author: Roopa Pai
Illustrator: Jit Chowdhury

Level 4



"Again! Stack them up again, Bonda! I want to try knocking them down from a different angle!"

Without hesitating for a moment, without even frowning, Bonda puts one battered box on top of the other for the fiftieth time. The high, shaky, cardboard tower is perfectly balanced, the way only Bonda knows how to build it.



I rev up my super-speedy turbo engine – **vrooom, VROOM** – and gun for it, coming in from the right this time. **BAM!** I crash through, shrieking with delight, as the tower explodes around me.

Bonda laughs, clapping as loudly as he did the first time I did this.

Dear Bonda. The best, most loyal friend anyone could have. Especially a 10-year-old in a wheelchair.

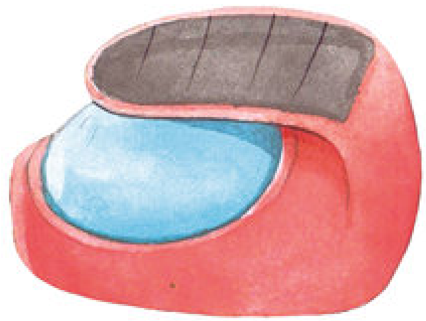


Hi. I'm Devi, and I'm from the year 2085 AD.

My grandfather is always going on about how much the world has changed since he was my age, back in 2016. It's more crowded now, but the air, thankfully, is less polluted, because a great many vehicles now run on electricity or solar power. There are fewer accidents too, because vehicles drive themselves, and they are very careful. There are fewer trees and forests than there used to be, but more are being planted all the time, which is good.

But what has REALLY changed, says my grandfather, is technology. There was technology way back in 2016 too, but nothing like what we have now. it has truly made life wonderful.

Well, MY life, anyway. It was technology that gave me my best friend.

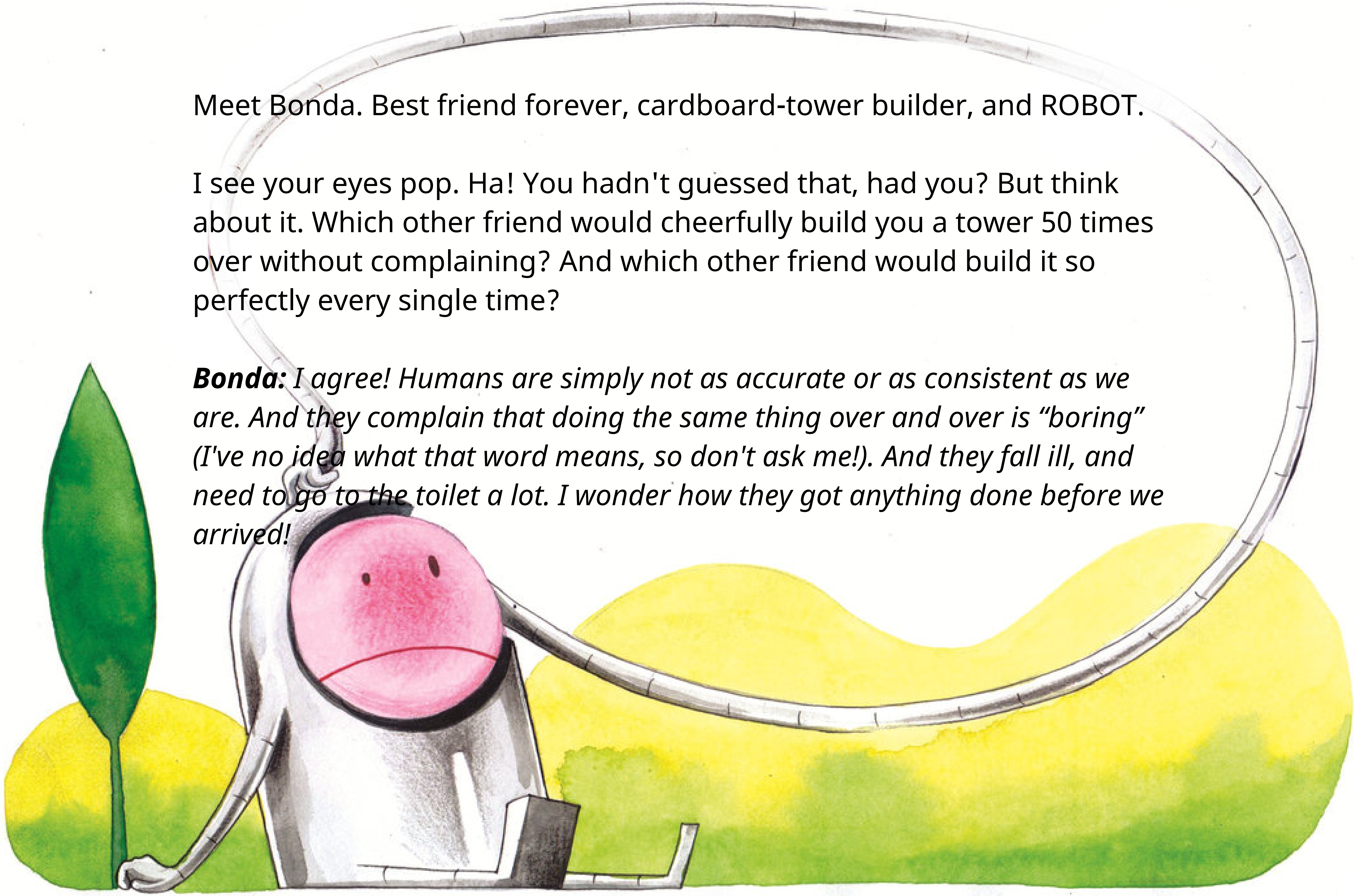


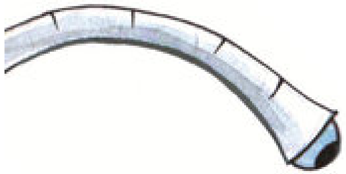


Meet Bonda. Best friend forever, cardboard-tower builder, and ROBOT.

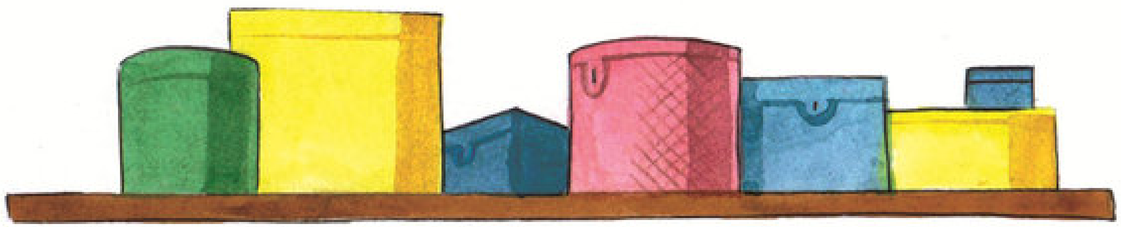
I see your eyes pop. Ha! You hadn't guessed that, had you? But think about it. Which other friend would cheerfully build you a tower 50 times over without complaining? And which other friend would build it so perfectly every single time?

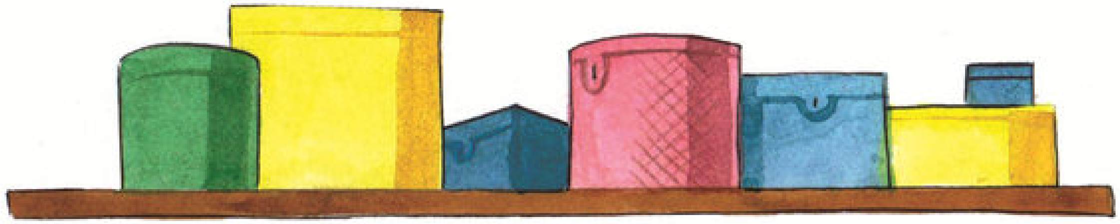
Bonda: *I agree! Humans are simply not as accurate or as consistent as we are. And they complain that doing the same thing over and over is "boring" (I've no idea what that word means, so don't ask me!). And they fall ill, and need to go to the toilet a lot. I wonder how they got anything done before we arrived!*





Building towers is not all Bonda can do, though. I can train him to do many other things – bowl me two dozen fast balls in ten minutes so that I can practise my batting, bring down my secret treasure box from the topmost shelf (which is so high that no one else can reach it without a ladder), lift Baba's heavy desk so I can see where my tiny gold earring has rolled off to (Ma would yell at me for hours if I lost it)... Things like that.





Bonda: *Like I said, humans are quite useless compared to us robots. The poor things are stuck at their sad little heights, while we can grow taller and shorter at will, by extending or collapsing our arms and legs. Our eyes can be cameras, telescopes, microscopes, or all three rolled into one!*





How do I train Bonda? By “programming” him. Programming means showing him, just once, how something's done. For instance, the other day, I wanted him to bring me my secret treasure box, the one I talked about earlier. Here's how I did it.

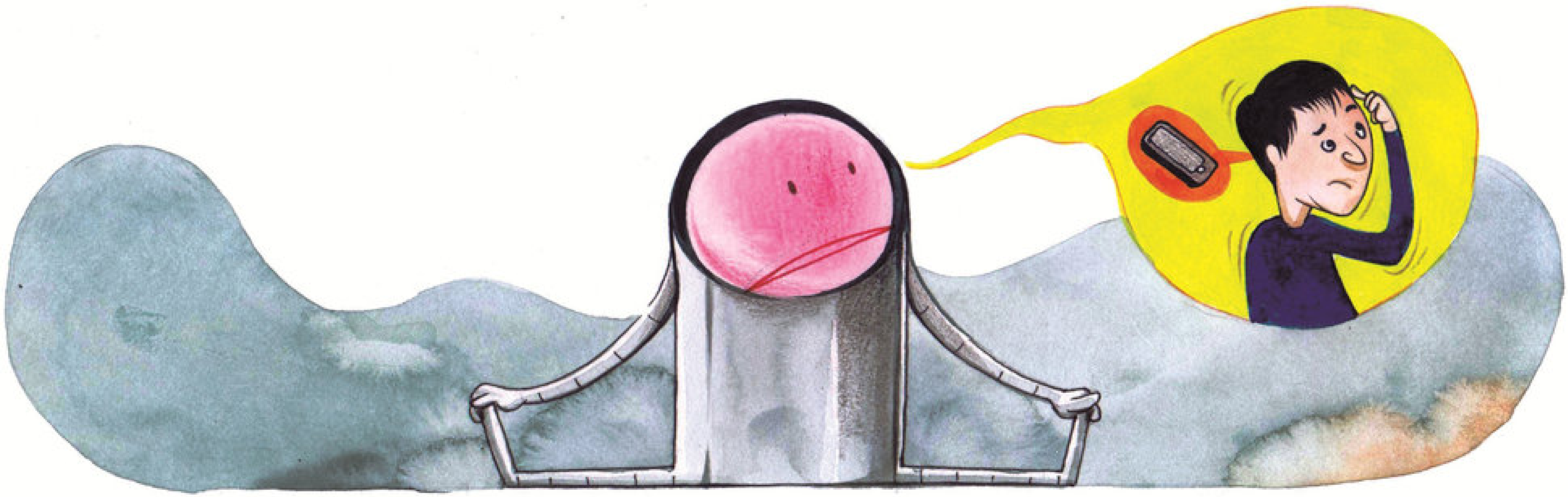
First, I directed Bonda to the shelf it was sitting on, drawing the route on the plan of my house he displays on his touchscreen.

“Can you reach up and scan the top shelf now, B?” I said when he got there. His arm shot out and up. As he ran his hand along the length of the shelf, the tiny camera inside his finger clicked away, taking pictures of everything there.

When he showed me those pictures, I simply touched the picture of the box I wanted. "That's my secret treasure box, Bonda," I said. "Can you bring it down for me?"

Now, whenever I need the box, I only have to say, "Secret treasure box!" and off he goes, straight to the shelf. Once he has “learnt” something, Bonda never forgets. His memory is fantastic!

Bonda: *Fantastic? Only to incompetent humans, who can never remember where they left their keys, their glasses, their phones...*



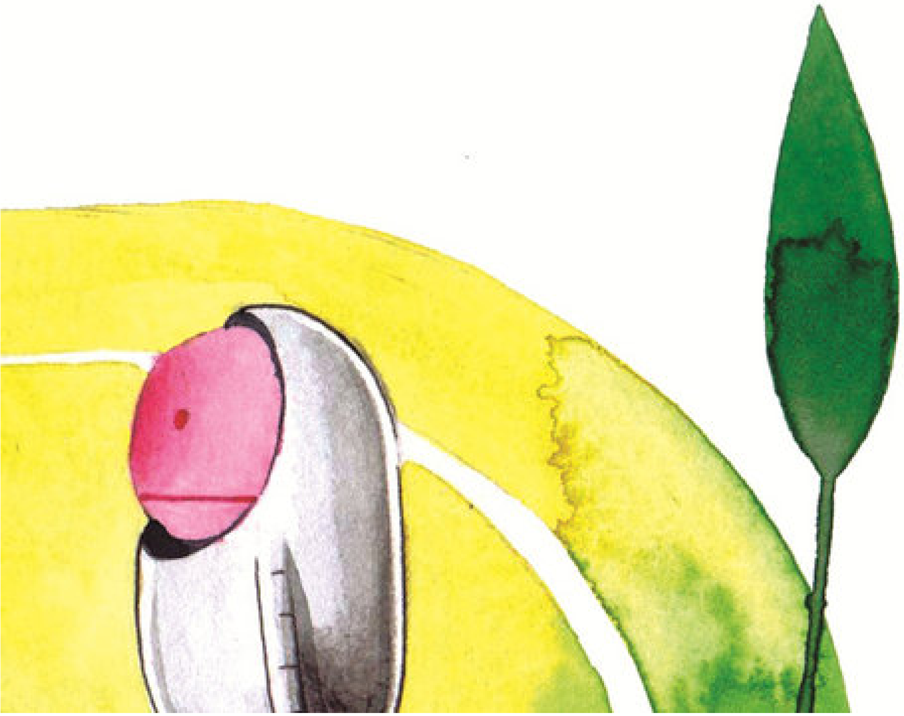
Yeah, that's what my best friend's like. And yeah, I am a very lucky girl indeed. Oh, don't get me wrong – I'm not weird. I do have human friends who I play with and fight with and go to school with. But I love Bonda more than all of them, because he doesn't sulk when I have fun with someone else, or get jealous when I beat him at maths, or mad when I forget to wish him on his birthday...

Psst! And this is because... Bonda has no feelings! But don't say that out loud – it might make him feel bad.



Bonda: *Tsk, tsk, Devi, where's your logical thinking, girl? You say I don't have feelings, and then you worry that I will “feel bad”. Humans can be logical, but when they "feel" sad, or mad, or scared, logic disappears! Pah! Who needs feelings?*

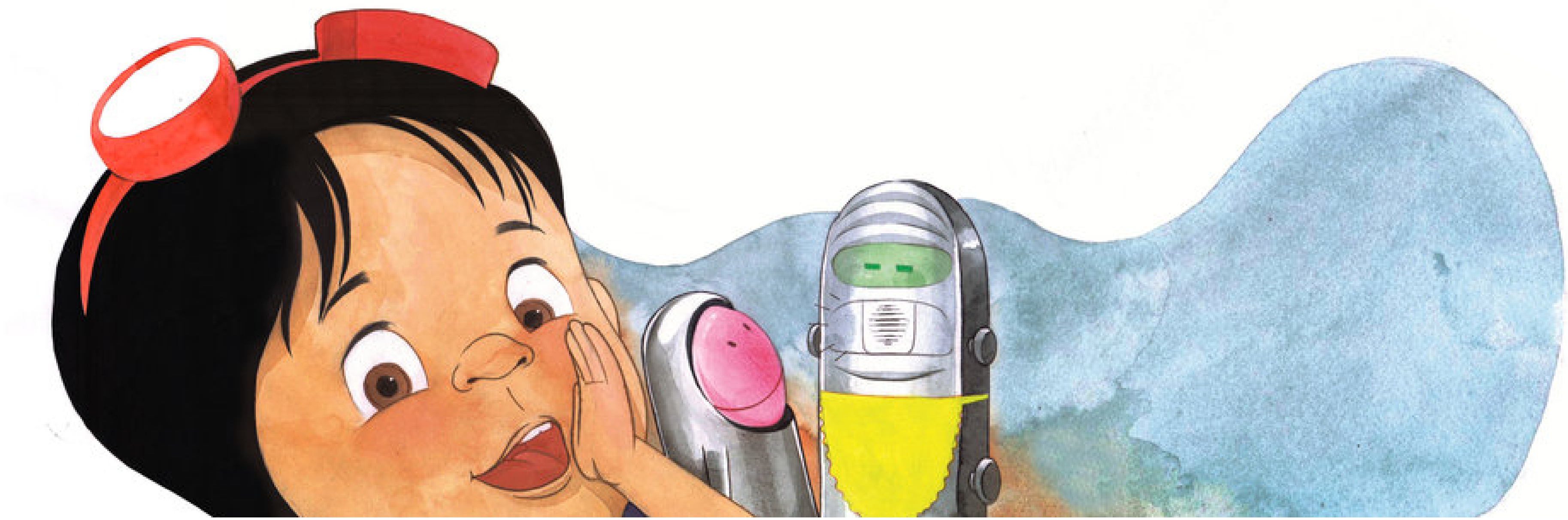
Wait! Was that a “feeling” I felt just now? My processor tells me it was. It tells me I am feeling something called “disgust”... Hmm... I don't know how to “feel” about that.



Oh, and here's the best part – I never have to feel bad that *he's* having fun with another friend instead of me, because... he doesn't have any!

Bonda: *Hey, hey, that's not true – I do have other friends! The robot waitress at the cafe always says "Hello" nicely, and so does the robot checkout boy at the grocery store...*

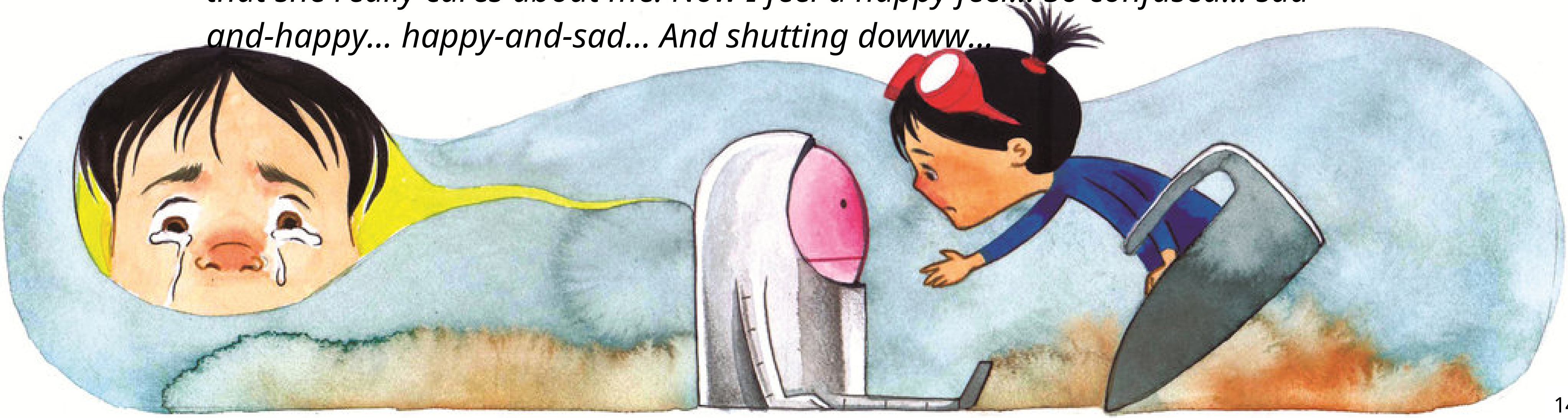
Wait a minute... I've just processed what Devi has been saying... she only likes me BECAUSE I have no other friends – AND no feelings! Not because of who I am! Oh no! I feel a rush of feels – I'm feeling mad, and sad, and...



"Bonda! Are you okay? You're overheating, Bonda – you have a fever! And your auto shut-down is not working!

"But don't worry, my friend, I will take care of you like you have always taken care of me. Listen carefully now, Bonda – I'm going to shut you down now so that your system can recover, ok? Don't be scared – it will be like going to sleep, that's all. And when I start you up again, you'll be back, good as new, and we will be best friends again. Do you hear me?"

Bonda: *Devi's eyes are all wet, like they are when she is sad, or scared. That makes me feel a sad feel. But my processor tells me that her wet eyes mean that she really cares about me. Now I feel a happy feel... So confused... sad-and-happy... happy-and-sad... And shutting dowww...*

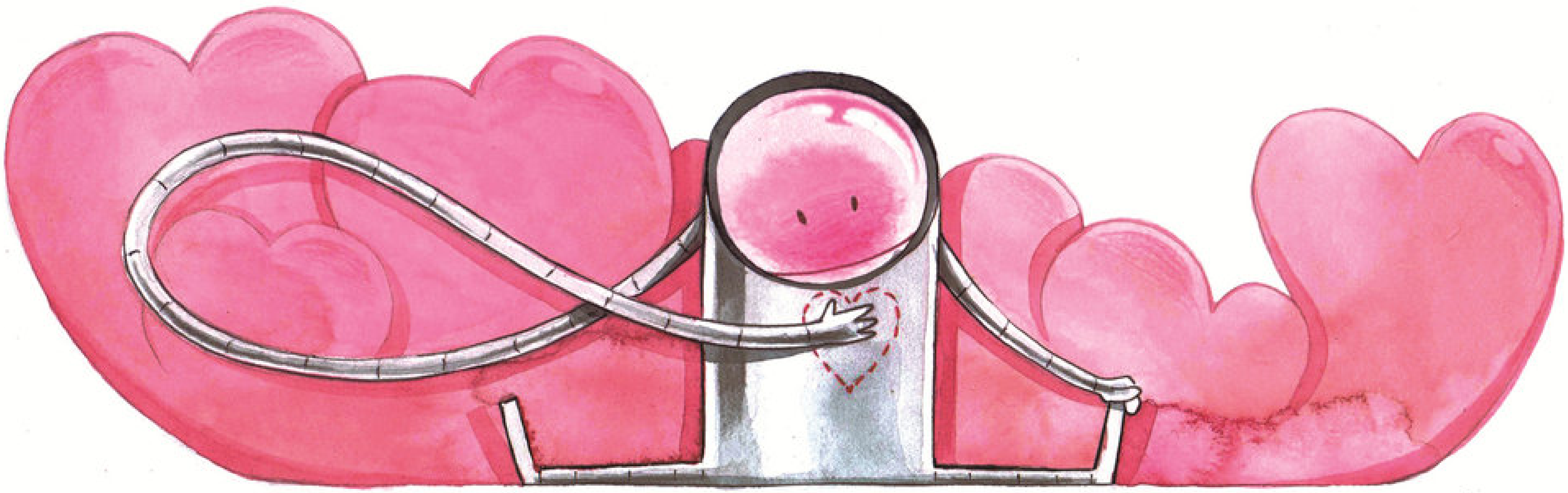




There is a whirr and a hum as Bonda reboots. I fight back my tears.

"Bonda?" I say. "Bonda, can you hear me? Do you know who I am? Please tell me your memory isn't wiped out! I want you to remember all the fun we've had this past year, all the love..."

Bonda: *A-ha! Love. Was that the feel I was feeling, that happy-and-sad feel?*





Bonda looks at me.

"Hi Devi! What would you like me to do for you today? Shall we play Stack-the-Boxes? Shall I bring you your secret treasure box? Do you want to..."

"Bonda! You're all right! Oh, I'm glad, glad, GLAD!"

I throw my arms around Bonda and hug him tight.



Bonda: *And then I do something really odd, something no one has ever programmed me to do. I wrap my arms around my friend Devi, for no logical reason at all.*

ROBOTS: YESTERDAY, TODAY AND TOMORROW

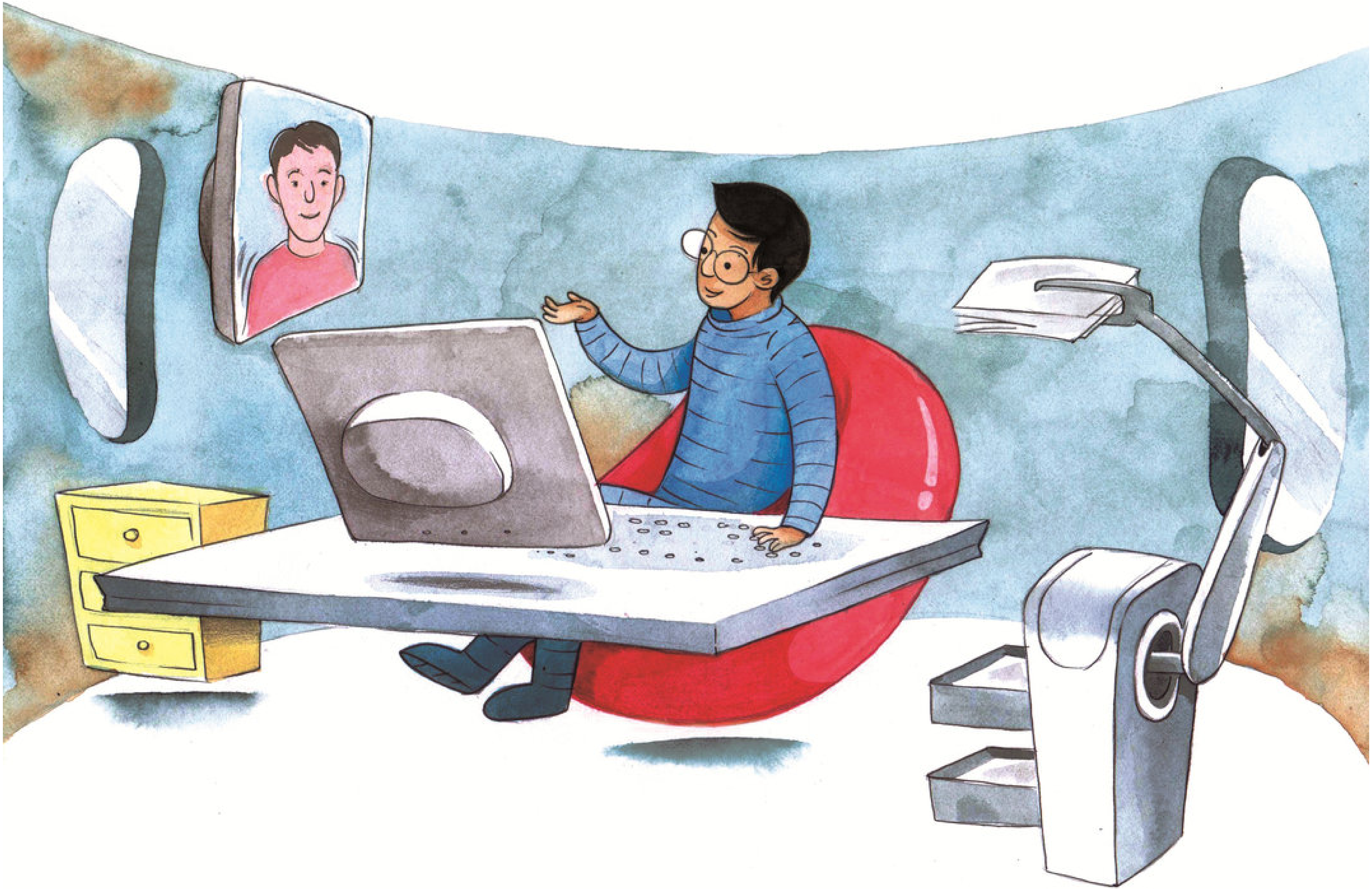
Will there be a Bonda for every Devi by the year 2085? We'll have to wait and see, but there is no denying that robots will be far more visible even in 25 years from now, by the year 2040.

Who or what is a robot?

If you said a robot is a machine that looks and acts like a human, except it moves jerkily, has a flat, expressionless voice, and eyes that flash when it is turned on, you've obviously been watching too many movies and TV shows. Because, actually, a robot is “any electro-mechanical machine guided by a computer program or electronic circuits". Yup, it doesn't have to look like a human at all. Which is why you may not have realised that there are robots all around us, already!

Really? Where?

Well, they are in factories, warehouses, orchards, hospitals and even homes. They may look like large mechanical arms, like the ones in car manufacturing plants, welding, gluing and painting car parts. Or they may look like tiny cameras, like the ones in hospitals, attached to thin hair-like tubes, entering our intestines and arteries to check them out for problems. Some robots look like flat round discs, working in homes and offices, buzzing around and cleaning floors at night when everyone is asleep. Some look like small wheeled vehicles, going into war zones, finding dangerous landmines, or rolling across the surfaces of the moon or Mars, taking pictures and collecting samples to send to scientists back on Earth.



I wish I could see a robot for myself!

If you have ever used, or even seen, a computer or a smartphone, you have 'seen' a robot! Yes, they are in those devices as well. Some of them even have names, like Siri and Cortana (have you heard of them?). They can help us find useful information - stuff for school projects, traffic reports (which roads have heavy traffic today? What is a good alternative route to take?), entertainment (where is the new Deepika Padukone movie running? And when is the next show?), and much more. They can even book our bus and train tickets, order our groceries, and tell us exactly how many calories we have burnt after a game of football.

What does the future of robots look like? What will the world really be like by, say, 2040, as far as robots are concerned?

We may not have robots walking our streets in India by 2040, but we will definitely be surrounded by robots of one kind or another without knowing it. It is quite likely that there will be driverless “robot” cars on our streets. We may have microscopic robots in our contact lenses that help us take pictures – we won't even have to hold our phones or cameras up to take them (but how will we take selfies??). And little airborne robots called drones will be flying busily all around – delivering letters, packages and kababs, putting delivery boys out of business, and hopefully reducing some traffic on our streets! As for 2085, 45 years AFTER that, who knows what robots will be up to?

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Bonda and Devi
(English)

Do best friends always have to be alike? Devi and Bonda are best friends, but Devi is a little girl, while Bonda is a… Well, he can lift heavy boxes, he can extend his arms and legs, he never forgets anything he's told, he can be turned on and off. Can you guess what he is?

This is a Level 4 book for children who can read fluently and with confidence.